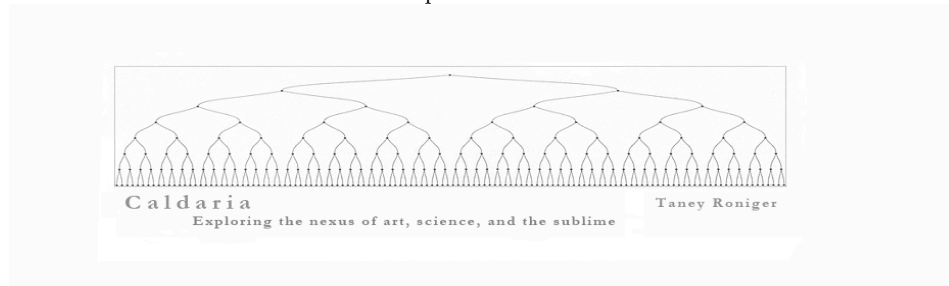


## 2012 Joseph Nechvatal interview by Taney Roniger

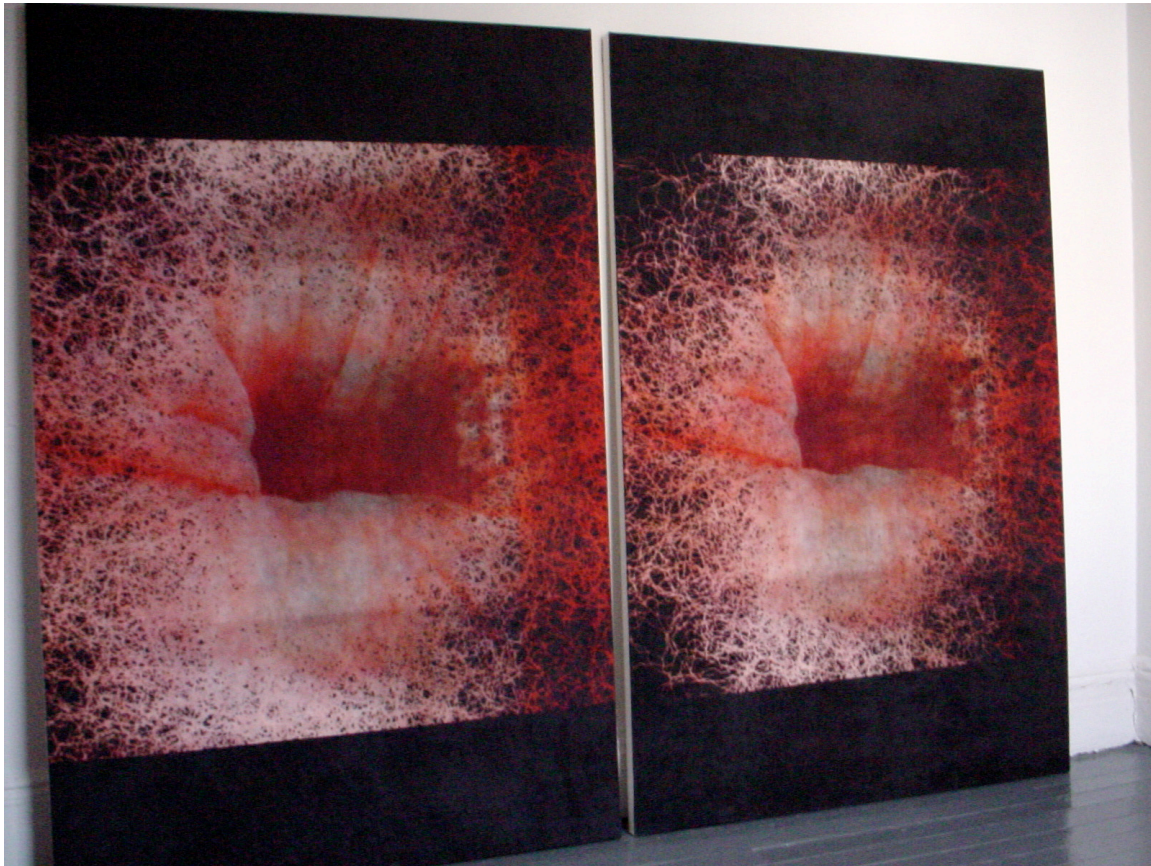
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euphOric anus & anus cOsmOs  
each 44x66" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas 2011

On the occasion of his exhibition *nOise anuSmOs* at Galerie Richard in New York (April 12 through May 26, 2012), the publication of his book *Immersion Into Noise*, and a concert of his remastered *viral symphOny* in surround sound, Joseph Nechvatal sat down with Taney Roniger to discuss his work. The following interview took place at Nechvatal's Ludlow Street studio on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on Sunday, February 26, 2012.



**Taney Roniger:** Thanks for giving me this sneak peek at your latest paintings – the ones we'll be seeing soon at Galerie Richard. Looking at these paintings, which are of course digital paintings, I'm struck by the lushness of the surface and by how rich the colors are. Have you ever made actual paintings? Tell me about your history with painting.

**Joseph Nechvatal:** When I was going to undergraduate art school at Southern Illinois University (SIU), I was making drawings and little gouaches and smaller-type paintings on paper, generally. And they were well-received. I was not so interested in painting on canvas at the time. You have to put it in the perspective of the post-minimalist period when people were doing a lot of installation, and process-based activities – often anti-illusion type things. But I was more interested in poetic imagery and explicitly spiritual imagery. So anyway, I really was into working on paper.



Untitled drawing on paper with gouache 1973

And then when I went on to Cornell I started painting on canvas for the first time and there I was very influenced by Jasper Johns. So I started getting into stencils and maps. I really found the stencil and cut-out and spray paint dynamically interesting... Already I was interested in spraying paint; the way I paint now with robotics.





Untitled 1974 oil on canvas 2x3'





Woman (Erica) 1975 oil on canvas 4x6'



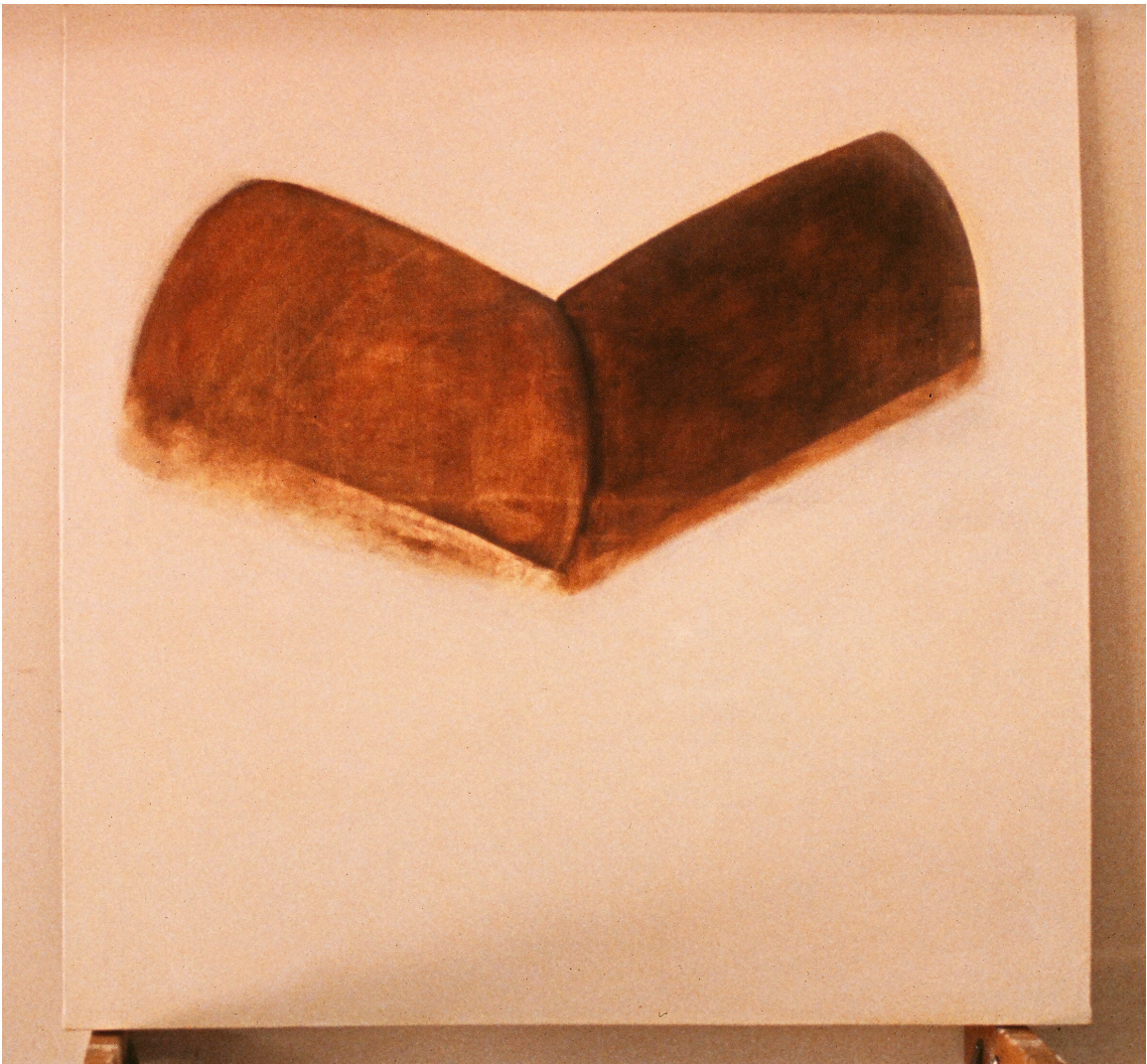


Nature Non-Morte 1975 oil on canvas 2x2.5'

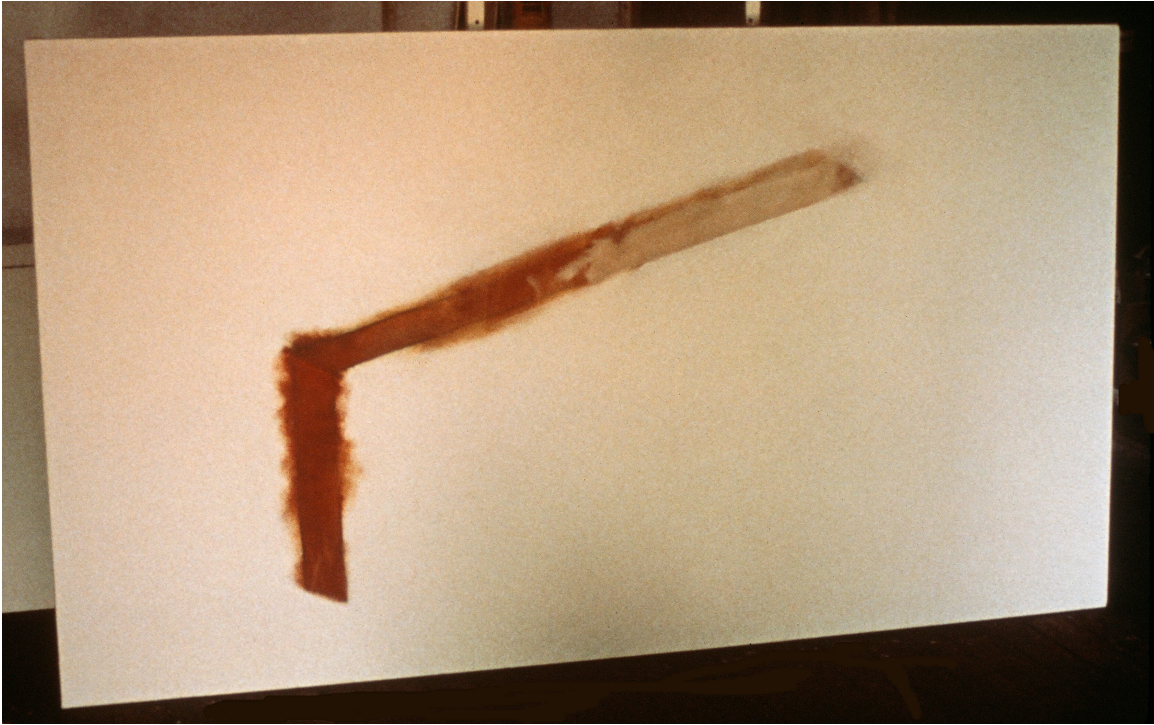
TR: *But very physical, it sounds like...*

JN: Yes, you know, it was a period of action and process. That went on for about a year. Then I moved to New York City – to Tribeca. And then I started making more minimalist paintings. I was very influenced by Fred Sandback and Mel Bochner. I started doing rather large, white canvases with very small indications of shapes – this is partly because I was studying Ludwig Wittgenstein's picture theory in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with Arthur Danto at the time. I was trying to figure out how we recognize shapes that come towards us and shapes that go in – that kind of optical reading of reality.





Untitled 1979 4x4' oil on canvas



Untitled 5x7' oil on canvas 1979

So the Wittgenstein picture theory kicks in, which I picked up initially from Jasper Johns, because I had read that Johns was really interested in Wittgenstein. And, happily, Danto was doing this course on Andy Warhol and Wittgenstein, and it was extremely important to me. And at the same time I started doing some minimalist paintings.

Just before that I got into combine pieces using pieces of wood and stone in relationship to a white painted field. I remember I was using a lot of white oil stick at the time. So you'd get this kind of physical, textured surface that for me became a kind of a representation of white noise. You know, it had a kind of energetic feel, a kind of suggestively to it of physics. I was interested in quantum physics and Albert Einstein and Fritjof Capra's book *The Tao of Physics* – all that was really important to me that year. So we're talking 1976 now.





Combine #1 1976 15x8.5" oil stick on wood with stone







Combine #3 1976 15x8.5 inches' oil stick on wood with stone



Combine #5 1977 3x3' oil stick on metal with stone

That was my biggest hand painting period. At that point I had quite a nice little loft situation, but all of that went away in 1980. I ended up living in an abandoned methadone center on Canal Street where I did a show called *Methadone Median*. For that I started making tiny collage/paintings – and drawings. And that's what led me to making the all-over gray, network, palimpsest drawings that I first was recognized for.





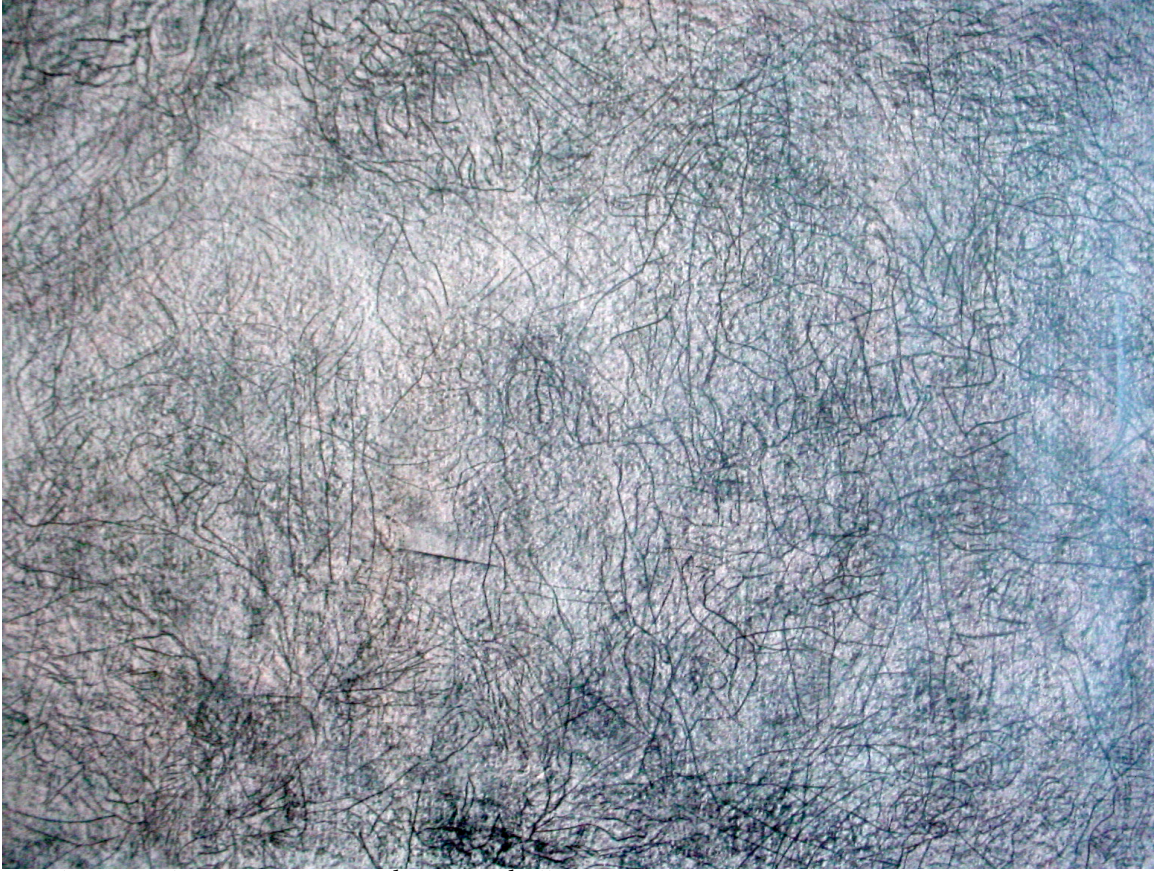
Butch 1979 11x14" graphite on paper





When Things Get Tough on Easy Street, 1981 Real Art Ways, Hartford, Ct. photo blow-up of 11x14" drawing





Hawk as Hawk 30x40" 1986 graphite and chalk on paper

But at the same time – I can't leave this out – I was doing performance dance work. I had a dance-performance art group with Cid Collins and Carol Parkinson. We went to Europe with Carolee Schneemann on an art performance tour. That was very interesting.





Trouble Light by Joseph Nechvatal: Carol Parkinson (spinning the light) Joseph Nechvatal (dancing in background), European & American Performances, 1977

TR: *So you were exploring everything, it sounds like.*

JN: I think so. I found my own language, my own vocabulary, with the gray, over-all, **network, superimposition** drawings.

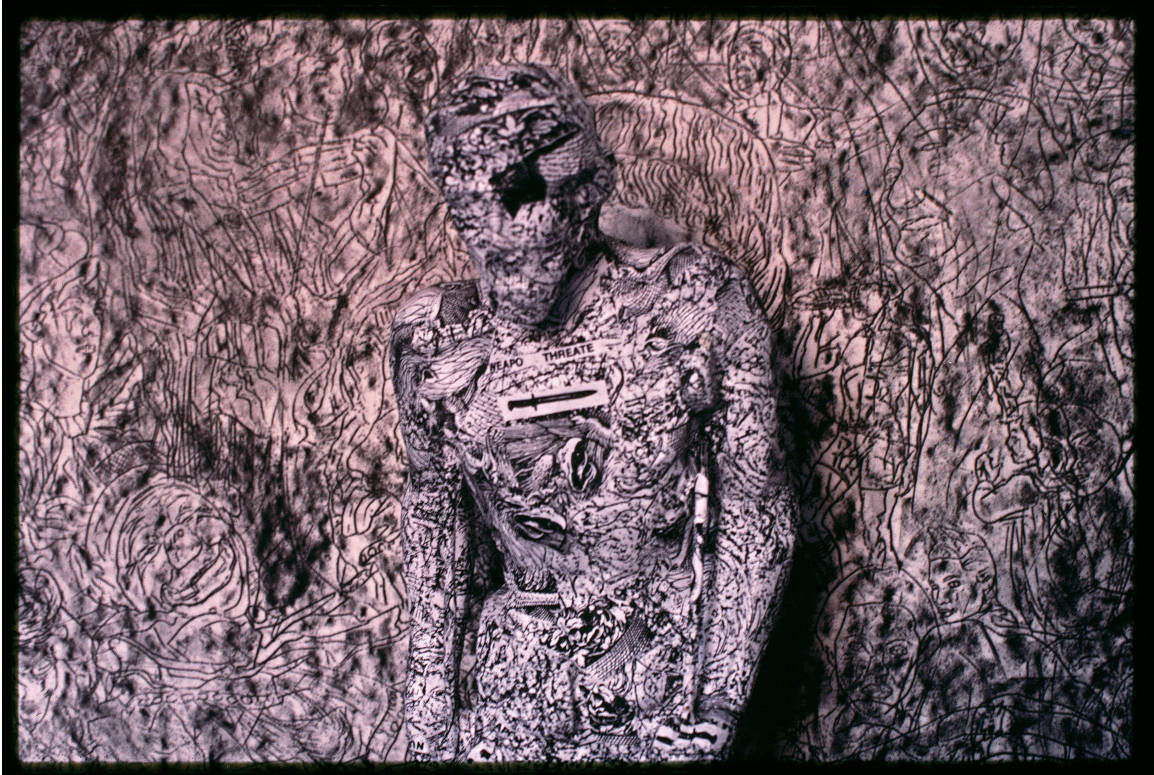
TR: *Which are not fully abstract, in any sense. Have you ever done anything that was really abstract? It seems like you've always retained some kind of representational element in your work.*

JN: Yeah, I think that's safe to say. I've never thought of myself as a pure abstract artist. I don't think I have done anything that's entirely abstract. I love working in between polarities – between representation and abstraction. Just as I love working in between the ideas of Dionysian chaos and Apollonian order. I think to accept these dichotomies as given is a mistake. And really, it's where they interact is where it gets interestingly adroit. So...from the little drawings, I got into media. I started photographing these drawings, blowing them up – as photographs mounted on board. I was doing posters in the street, and taking these very intimate, difficult, obscure drawings and trying to force them into the public space. Which was paradoxical, of course. But that was my interest – in attacking the logo, the political and social logos of the times. This is now early- to mid-80s.

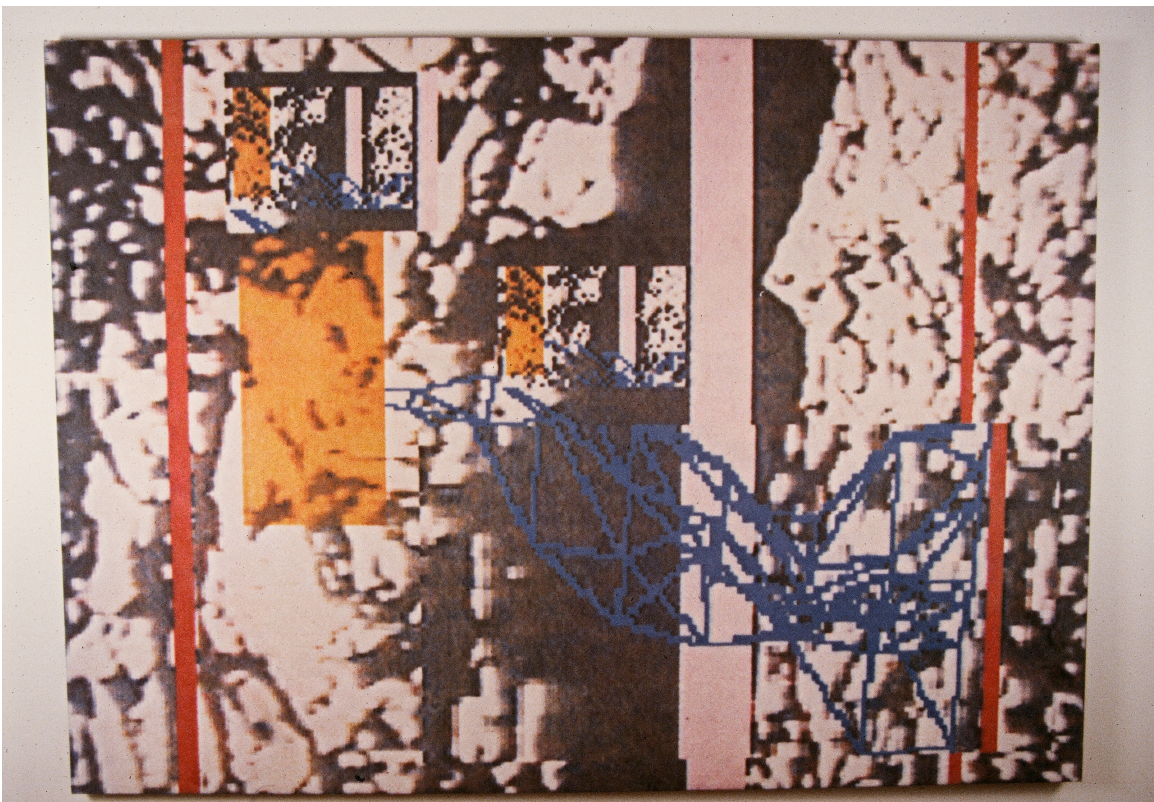
TR: *So the era of the palimpsest drawings was the '80s. What came after that?*

JN: Early computer-robotic paintings based on drawings, first, and then a character I created called *The Informed Man*.



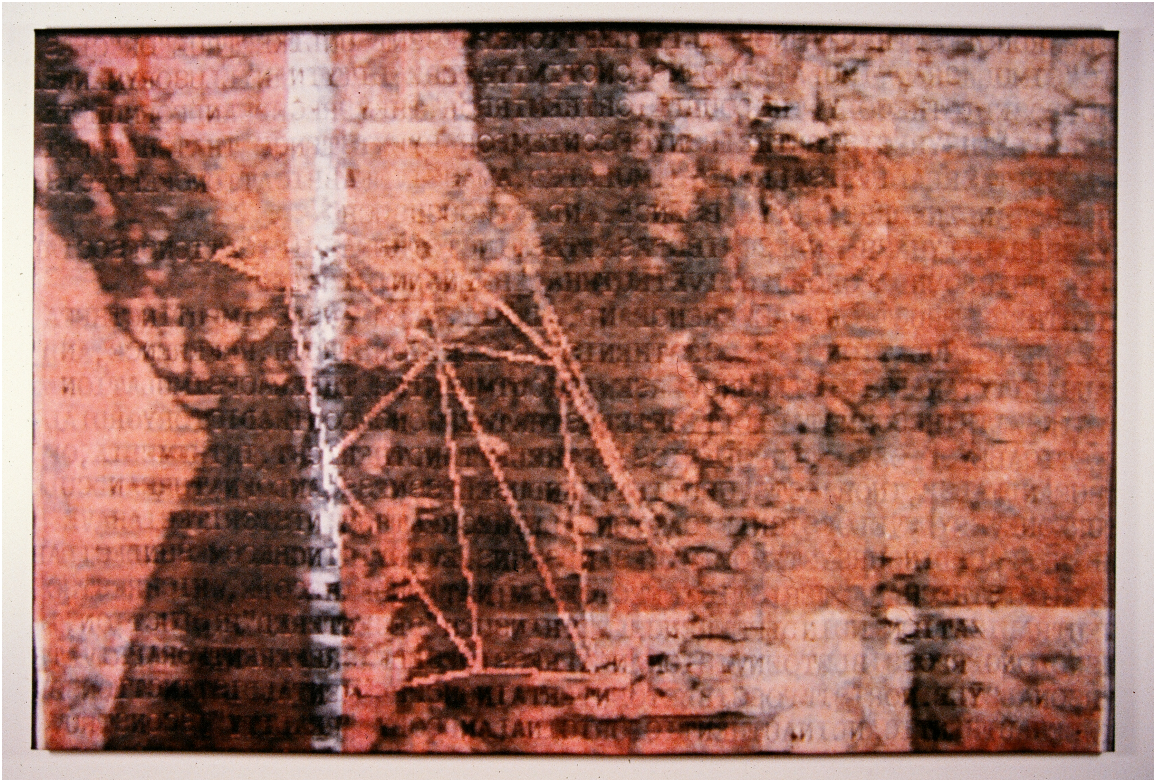


Informed Man 1986 82x116" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas



Integrating Web 1987 computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas 71x98"

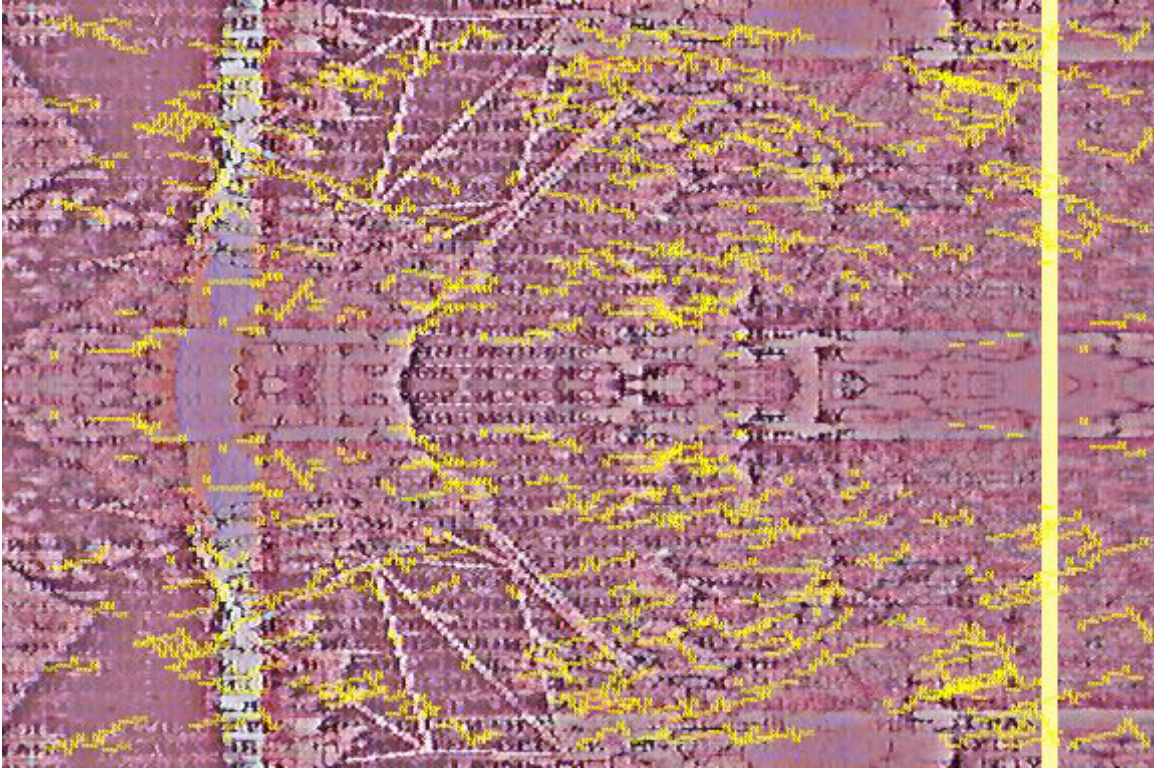




Serenade 1989 91 x 137" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

Subsequently, the research into the first computer virus project. That's when I had my first residency in Arbois, France, and I said, okay, I'm going to start all over. This is at the height of the AIDS crisis, and all that suggested, broadly and to me personally. I uploaded onto a big computer at the Saline Royale, Arc-et-Senans, my body of work – and made that the subject of the first computer virus attacks that Jean-Philippe Massonie at the Université de Franche-Comté worked with me on.





Viral attack transmission 1993 196x286 cm computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

TR: Before we get too far ahead, I want to jump back for a second to your college days. I love the story of your conversion to art during these years. That's such a great story. Would you mind recounting that here?

JN: No, I don't mind. To be honest, I was more interested in music in high school. I played in a band, and, you know, I thought of myself as more of a musician. And I liked doing art as a goof. And I never would have identified myself as yearning to be a visual artist back then. I think I wanted to be either a musician or a lawyer. Because I also had this political interest, with what was going on back then with the liberation movements. So I started studying sociology. And I thought that would probably be it: I could make music for fun or professionally, and follow my political passion in a career. And that went on I think until sophomore year. And then I was becoming more and more depressed about that, and about the political landscape because of the George McGovern loss in 1972. And one night I was driving a motorcycle around Chicago, and I was in a deep funk, and I happened to see the light from a beautiful stained glass window shining in the corner of my eye, and a kind of voice spoke to me saying something like: "Be an artist."

TR: *You actually heard words? Or was it kind of an intuitive jolt?*

JN: I'm going to assume it was my unconscious. I mean, I'm not a schizophrenic; I've never heard voices ever again. So I'm going to assume it was sort of a combination of my emotional state and the sound of the motorcycle [laughs]. But I had kind of an acoustical perception of words in a masculine voice. And it was very brief. But it caught my attention, and I said: maybe I should take that seriously. And I decided I would. I didn't know how to go about it. It was still the summer; the university hadn't started up again – this is Southern Illinois University. I decided I should probably go around and photograph stained-glass windows in Chicago. I did. I don't know really why, but I did. I went and started studying what it is to look at pictures, what can pictures say to our feelings, and how does that work. And, you know, I was not religious. I grew up a Catholic, but I stopped going to mass when I think I was fifteen. You know, I wasn't a



believer in traditional religion anymore. I did believe in a spiritual path, or...that discovery was individualized, and that institutionalization of religion actually suppressed individual revelation.

*TR: So maybe it's not so significant that it was actually the stained glass from a church that was the catalyst. Or was it?*

JN: I can't separate that out, because I think it certainly had to do with the color. Because it was gloomy, I was in a funk, and this color was joy. This color and light was joy. You know, when I think of light and color now I think of the computer, of course, and it makes me think of virtuality, which is potentiality. You know, it's like anything's possible when you're in the realm of light and color. They're just the building blocks for almost any future that you could imagine. So, that's all I can tell you. And then I went back to SIU, I immediately signed up for Jimmy Wright's drawing class. That was key. Michael Onken and Robert Paulson were excellent art teachers for me, and I was deeply impressed with the lectures of Buckminster Fuller. I excelled in art. And I continued to study philosophy and sociology courses, but I dropped my ambitions to be a sociologist or a lawyer and decided that I was meant to be an artist and that I would take that route, which I did. And I'm so happy I did. I ended up being awarded the Rickert-Ziebold Trust Award – the top art student prize-grant at graduation – which helped me get to Cornell and start my post-grad life on the east coast.

*TR: That story seems significant to me, because it's clear from your telling that at the time you felt profoundly moved...*

JN: It changed my life.

*TR: Yes. And – correct me if I'm going too far – that perhaps it occurred to you in that moment that your interest in social justice could better be pursued in art. I say this because I see you as a deeply political artist, at heart.*

JN: Yes. Because the frustration I had mentioned before was the frustration of trying to social-manage change, and particularly liberation movement. Because how do you dictate liberation? There's no way. It's an emergent quality, and you can nurture it. "Culture" is a nice word here, because it creates a kind of viral, emergent capacity within a Petri dish of a-life. And that's my approach – that my art and my social activity should be united, yet I never really wanted to become didactic. But I did feel that the political was important. And actually that's why I never really wanted to be a pure abstract artist. Because when I was coming up in the art world...You know, you did have really great artists, like Robert Ryman, that are wonderful in their purely abstract art, but it seemed in the context of any social turmoil, it does seem like a rich boy's toy or a luxury item. You know, I think art is stronger if it has more levels of complexity where you can see political implication that's not directed.

*TR: Yeah, when I've read the story I've thought about something that comes up again and again in your new book, which is the "secret I," the state of the "secret I." Art – great art – brings you back to the state of that secret I.*

JN: I think the important part is the incomprehensibility of it. The enigma of our I. Good art throws you into your own enigma. And you're the one to dig yourself out of the enigma. And that is a great journey, a great pleasure. And that's how people grow – not by being patted on the back and saying "you're great," but by saying: "Deal with this."

*TR: Or...by being told what to do. That's not how people change.*

JN: Correct.

*TR: That's the link here. You had this profound experience, where it really brought you to that place, and you said: this is the way to achieve action.*



JN: I agree. That's a good, correct reading of my experience at that time. That did lead me to being involved with Colab (Collaborative Projects), and ABC No Rio, and the 80s art and political mixture for a while. I did take a specific didactic political issue for a while in the early 80s, which was my position against nuclear proliferation and the Ronald Reagan military build-up. That was the closest I came to direct political statement, because people would see my complicated, weird images and, okay, they could see the end of the world. That was the idea – it was an apocalyptic imaginative moment: you better think about it, folks. It could be around the corner lurking in the dark; if we don't do something, it could be coming our way. Because it did feel like that, in the early 80s. In New York it was palpable. I mean, you had not only the decay of New York City... You had this apocalyptic boulder hanging over the head, with the Cold War being heightened, and nuclear missiles being put in Europe by Reagan and all of this conflict and hype and freaked military consciousness. Happily, we escaped that doom. But it did feel like a very strong possibility. I was trying to bring that to public consciousness. And to have my audience deal with it.



Death of Culture 1984 11x14" graphite on paper in the collection of the RISD Museum

That's the closest I came to didactic political statements in my work. Then, when I got involved with the AIDS issue with my first computer virus work, I really wanted to avoid any didactic statements.

TR: *I know you were deeply affected by the AIDS crisis, but it seems to me that your interest in viruses has less to do with actual, biological viruses than it does with the virus as metaphor.*

JN: Yes. I think art is for me deeply symbolist, and I think I can trace that back to my youth. My first real interests in any kind of artistic expression were the French Symbolist poets Stéphane Mallarmé, Comte de Lautréamont, Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud, of

course. I used to read them in high school after smoking a joint, and they took me out of my suburban box. So I think symbolism is an important component in my appreciation of art. Which could be seen as passé, or due for a comeback. I think art has to be conceptual, but it also has to be poetic with a metaphoric component.

TR: *It saddens me a bit that a lot of artists refuse to talk about metaphor these days.*

JN: Well, it was a taboo, to be purged under the Greenbergian paradigm. I mean, that was to be avoided like the plague.

TR: *Because then it was all about pure opticality, pure formalism...*

JN: Pure materiality, pure formalism, pure opticality, yeah. Pure pure purity.

TR: *The whole "project of purity"...*

JN: It's fine in your drinking water, but that's not even going to happen [both laugh]. No. Not part of my interest spectrum.

TR: *Noise is decidedly anti-purist.*

JN: Clearly. I mean, we've had enough of pure. What we need are contaminations.

TR: *So, back to the virus as metaphor. Can you talk about some of the metaphorical implications of the virus? Are we a virus living symbiotically on our Earth host?*

JN: Seems so, and the more we reflect on that the better virus we can be by avoiding killing our host.

TR: *In your previous book Towards an Immersive Intelligence, you explored the shift in ontology that you saw emerging as a result of a nascent immersive consciousness connected to virtual reality. How did your interest in immersion come about, and how did it come to focus on noise, which is the subject of your new book, Immersion Into Noise?*

JN: It started, first, with the ideal of looking for a post-pure-painting-as-object approach. Looking past that. Rather, where you visually enter the painting by projecting yourself into it. Like Wassily Kandinsky wished. He wanted the viewer to enter and explore a painting. That is what I was looking for. A way out of the painting-as-object. So, in my case I came up with the gray drawings that invite the viewer to visualize content from the murky overload of representational imagery presented in conflict. So already I was on board with that. I just think it's the total use of your imagination as an artist or as a viewer of other artists, to give all and just get into it, to drop what you're doing and go there. But then it got more specific with my research with Roy Ascott for my Ph.D. There I wanted to take that immersive use of the mind and see how it could apply to new technology. So I started to study virtual reality and its ideals. And the idea for virtual reality is that you're immersed into a virtual world which you can navigate. I did my thesis on that topic, and I revisited art history and the history of architecture and ritual and different cultural manifestations through the wide lens of immersion. What I call the immersive impulse or desire for immersion. So that was where it became concrete, with the VR head-mounted device. Then I applied immersion to audio aspects when I created the *viral symphOny*. Then I started to write the Wikipedia page on the history of noise music. I did quite a bit of research on anything that was non-musical in terms of audio musical experiments and that's what led me to the book about immersion into noise. So then I could use some of the lessons I learned from the VR research, and that idea of environment, of ambience, of surround sound, and apply them to a noisy surround vision. Pushing our sensibilities behind our head as well as in front of our eyes. Trying to use the full instruments that we have available to us to feel. And that was the basis of the book *Immersion Into Noise*.



TR: So, I believe it was during your Ph.D. years that you coined the term *viractual* to connote the interface between the virtual and the actual.

JN: Yes. It first came to me when I was studying how performance artists were starting to try to use virtual tools, and they always wanted to have it be this toggling back and forth, so that you had something physical and real and performative and confrontational, but also virtual at the same time. So they were looking to blend and mix. It was when I was studying that material that I formulated that concept, which did immediately seem to have many ramifications for art and society at large. That was really the nut, or the kernel of the nut, I was looking at people like Stelarc, and performance artists that were then going into networking and virtual aspects of computers.

TR: Of course, that's not the only instance in which you've merged two terms. This seems to be a central part of your practice. I remember in the Kandinsky symposium [an online symposium moderated by Roniger in which Nechvatal participated] you coined the term "*viewpant*" as a possible replacement for the limiting term "*viewer*" – i.e., "*viewer*" plus "*participant*." We see it in the title of your upcoming show, too – "*anusmOs*," which is presumably "*anus*" plus "*cosmos*."

JN: Yes. Well, again, as I said early on in our conversation, it's interesting to look in between polarities. Sometimes it produces new ideas, and new points of view that are valid. It's not just smooching stuff together uncritically. Occasionally there is a rich middle ground that is important. I mean, I say that because I'm fearful of being accused of downplaying difference, and that's far from the truth...Because I'm a Deleuzian, and for us difference is everything. We look for differences everywhere. So I'm not at all looking for homogeneity, unity, transcendence. No. Difference and immanence is what I'm interested in.

TR: What I see underlying your whole project is a kind of syncretistic vision in constant search of destabilizing rigid polarities. But it's not like you're bringing the two poles together in order to form some third neither-here-nor-there thing; you're putting the two together in a kind of dynamic tension...

JN: Dynamic tension! Beautiful. That's the noise aspect. It has to have a tension, a kind of provocational element. It's not trying to say "Everything is everything." That may be true on one level, but we don't live on that level. I think it's more intellectual to perceive the minute differences, and that's what a connoisseur does.

TR: I think that's a really important distinction to make. It's not the unification of the two, it's the tension between them. Are you familiar with Freud's essay "*The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words*"?

JN: No.

TR: What he did was he discovered that in certain ancient languages – Egyptian, for example – there exist a lot of words that mean two opposite things at once. They'll have a word like *love-hate*....

JN: See, I think that's the value of this whole thing. Brilliant. Thank you for bringing that to my attention. I do think that's the real payoff for this – the knowledge that things can be contradictory and true simultaneously.

TR: Right!

JN: If you've got that, then your life opens up and you're far more tolerant and understanding, and a better and wiser human being, for understanding that. I have to read that text.

TR: Yeah. It's really interesting. The early Egyptians seemed fine with concepts like "*farnear*," "*lovehate*," "*inout*," whereas today this would be anathema. For Freud, of course, it was that there was something therapeutic about recognizing this. You can interpret the symbolism of dreams in this way. A dream image can stand for both a thing and its opposite, and both are simultaneously valid.

JN: Excellent.

TR: *Another thing that I definitely want to ask you about is digitization. You've called it "the universal technical platform for networked capitalism." It's also your chosen artistic language. Can you talk a little bit about what makes it the ideal language for you?*

JN: It's the idea of the Trojan horse. If you're going to be an agent of political consciousness, of resistant awareness, of non-acceptance, you still have to work within the language of the power. Otherwise, you're immediately marginalized and cast aside and have no subsequent contribution that's recognizable. So I think, again, you have to be driving a Trojan horse; you have to enter the dialogue, the vocabulary, the system, the semiotics, and then from there subvert. In other words, you can't subvert from the outside. You have to subvert from the inside. This is Jean Baudrillard. And I don't like a lot of Baudrillard, but I do think he was right in this case. Yeah, it's subversion from within. And that's really why I started doing the big blow-ups and got into the computer. If you read my artist's statement from Documenta 8 in 1987, it's all about this subversion. Yes, I'm using the computer because the computer is the dominant language of military economics, and we have to confront it head-on. So it is a kind of realism. Of course, you have to be very careful with that, but that was my intension. I mean, it's easy to make an avant-garde stance and then end up just being swept up inside of some kind of slick production that plays along so that all of your criticality is glossed over. And it's hard enough already to maintain criticality in cultural production, but once you're inside the slick game, you have to really be subversive. For me it all comes down to the structure of the imagery. I guess that's really why I decided the anus was an important image. It wasn't chosen to be a sexual or provocative or funny image. It was chosen to be a key portal to poke into the information age.

TR: *You've talked about things like "digital fluidity," which is in some sense an oxymoron. You know what I mean? Because digital language is binary. So it strikes me as curious that if what you're after is in some sense exposing the fallacy of rigid binary thinking that your chosen language is itself binary.*

JN: The string of zeros and ones underlying everything – you can't get more binary than that. I totally agree. But then it is like water. Water is made up of two kinds of atoms, but what we do with water varies drastically. We swim in it, we brush our teeth with it, we paint with it, we drink it, and we pee in it... It's undeniable that zeros and ones make up the structure of the digital medium, but I think it's almost not important because the medium is so fluid.

TR: *Well, talk about the fluidity, then. As a medium, it does lend itself to a certain...*

JN: Transformation, metamorphosis.

TR: *Yes.*

JN: Yeah. You can take the same data that's being produced, and you can output it as a visual or as an audio production. It's easy to convert signals into whatever you want to. You just change the parameters. The question always comes down to: What are you doing? Why are you doing it? And not so much how you do it. But the fluidity part... So, of course when we think of the digital age, the fluidity of the internet, the networked connectivity, we think of flows of data. But for me it's an interest also in human potentiality, which is one of the reasons I got interested in **cyber culture** in the early 90s. It seemed like the platform for transformation. And that folded me back into my interests in the Classical Greek poetry of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where things can become other things – flowers become people, and people become clouds, and this kind of super-fluidity, which we experience in dreams sometimes, if we're lucky. It has to do with art as a poetic metaphor used for realizing our human potential and our full sensibilities towards our real life, the real people in our lives, our real politics. How we live our lives economically, and the decisions we make in the real world. So in that sense I'm a materialist. Actually, that's why I became interested in Speculative Realism, because they don't shy away from what they call transcendental materialism, which I think kind of nails what I've been feeling and groping for. And it sounds of course oxymoronic, and certainly paradoxical – but maybe not! You have to dig



in and dig around. Anyway, that kind of idea of human potentiality interests me. And I think that's the reason we have great art. I think art is to change consciousness.

*TR: That was actually going to be my penultimate question. Because I feel like it's so important to your project, this idea of self-reprogrammability. I mean, that is such a crucial insight – that we can change, that we can be liberated from our conditioning. At a time when we're cornered on all sides by so many determinisms...*

JN: The human spirit is being tapped down and down and down. We must strive to escape that hammer. It's a metaphysical battle and each person, each woman and each man, is a soldier, and we all have to fight. And art I think is the domain for that.

*TR: And you feel that – this potential to change – when you're with not only your own work, but when you have a profound experience with another work? You feel that it's changed you in some way?*

JN: I do. Almost chemically. And it stays with you. And not that we don't outgrow our appreciation of certain artworks, particularly when you're young. In my case, I had a passion for Jasper Johns. I just couldn't get enough of him. I was in love with him, you could almost say. But then I outgrew it, you know? So that's part of the maturation period, I guess. I believe in evolving through our tastes and getting more sophisticated. I believe in connoisseurship.

*TR: What do you mean by connoisseurship?*

JN: People developing their own tastes by challenging **them**. The act of people who know why they enjoy things and why they don't through self-consciousness. I think that self-consciousness is the key for the re-programming that I discussed in the noise book, both on a material level and on a psychological level. So I guess it has to do with loving the subtlety of noise, an art noise that makes you challenge your barriers. You have to open yourself up to a new frontier, not necessarily always accept it, but always allow yourself the possibility of accepting it. So it's an expansive-immersive force-field.

*TR: So, never arriving, always furthering?*

JN: I think it's arriving and furthering. I wouldn't go so far as to say never arriving. I think we arrive, and then move again. In eccentric circles, I should say. Moving out and out and out. I think that is the basis of real connoisseurship. Knowing what for you personally works the best and what the historical context is, of course. You know, an aficionado has to know history but also has to know everything that's going on right now.

*TR: That doesn't sound to me like snobbery or elitism. I guess what you're saying is that it's available to anybody who wants it. So, go out there and get it!*

JN: I'm living proof of that! I came from a middle-class family. I mean, my mother had a reproduction of *The Gleaners* on the wall, and that's all the art we had. I got all of my art inspiration from public libraries. My father was a more or less a commercial photographer. He didn't introduce me to the work of Man Ray or any other fine art stuff. But I would go to the Art Institute of Chicago. I remember seeing a Max Ernst show when I was very young. It had a strong effect on me. Again, because of this image of transformation and metamorphosis, which I saw in his work. And the Dada impertinence of it all, which appealed to me as a young teenager.

*TR: Let's turn back to Immersion Into Noise. I just want to say that I found the chapter on Paleolithic cave art, where you describe your descent into the Lascaux cave (among others) so moving and so powerful.*

JN: Thank you. I think that's the core of the book, and I try to make the case for the art of noise visually based on that, because it was the most concrete – in immersive terms – example that I experienced and that I could write about first-hand. I mean, as you can tell in the book I tried to write about visual noise from my travels and experiences. But yes, the cave of Lascaux was a transformative moment.



TR: Yes, even reading it was. Honestly, something that had never occurred to me before was the element of fear, of danger, involved anyone's descent into that cave. That was so pronounced in your description.

JN: There were bears living in there!

TR: Many carnivorous predators!

JN: And it was dark.

TR: Really dark – and cold, and damp, and silent.

JN: And maybe you lost your way. Because it's very complicated under there. These caves, they go on and on, sometimes for miles and miles and miles, branching. The other huge misconception people have is they think that people lived in there. You know, like these paintings were the wallpaper that they had in the family room. Nothing could be further from the truth.

TR: Right. These people – men, women, we don't know – they went down in there knowing perfectly well the risk to life or limb. And whatever they did down there, it was worth that risk.

JN: And their society supported it. Researchers determined that these people that did these engravings and paintings probably did them full-time. Meaning that they didn't have to hunt. Meaning that the society deemed it worthy of their support. People think, "Oh, it was so hard back then." They didn't work that many hours! They'd go pick a few berries, the guys would go hunt for a few hours, and that was your day! Then you could start...

TR: Living.

JN: Living. Talking – and, you know, trying to learn how to make a language.

TR: And other such frivolities [laughs].

JN: Yeah, that took a lot of time.

TR: And thinking and wondering – all that stuff. One of the things I wonder about is if there's something of that element of danger, or fear, or incomprehensible enormity that attracts us to the internet. I think you've touched on this somewhere.

JN: I have talked about how computers stimulate us almost like sublime vastness, which is both enticing and scary. Your typical sublime reaction to enormity is attraction and fear.

TR: Horror...

JN: Horror, yes. Fear of loss of ego, of identity. And just the impressiveness of the scale of it all. Have you ever been to the Grand Canyon?

TR: Yes.

JN: There you go.

TR: Nothing can prepare you for it.

JN: No. All the pictures, all the movies – no. Walk up to the edge, and then we'll talk! Words, pictures, do not do justice to what you feel with your body and your eyes in a situation like that. I think the sublime is very much pertinent now. There is a re-interest in it, as you might know, with the metal group Liturgy and their movement called transcendental black metal music. I like what they do, as well as Wolves In The Throne Room. They're connecting music back to the



vastness of nature. I find that very moving. They are an influences on my *nOise anusmOs* show at Galerie Richard.

*TR: What were some of your other influences? How did you come up with the theme for this show?*

JN: I was also listening to a lot of Rahsaan Roland Kirk (who I saw perform live when I was at Cornell), Pharoah Sanders (who I saw live in Chicago the summer of my conversion to art) and late John Coltrane - all this avant-garde sax. I was reading Manuel de Landa's breathtaking book *Philosophy & Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* in which he explores simulations of emergence in systems of different scales, from the atomic to the social. He goes into the cellular automaton as a general principle as the basis of geology and tribal organizations and much, much more. A whole historical re-analysis through the cellular automata principle, which is, again, using simple elements with enough frequency that emergent properties pop up. I was reading that as I was listening to the music while I was in the south of France staying in a house in the country. So I would look at the flowers and the seeds all around at the same time.



nOise anusmOs 44x66" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas 2011

*TR: And Speculative Realism? Did that play a role?*



JN: Yeah. I'd already been reading Speculative Realism well before because my neighbor Lauren Sedofsky had brought it to my attention. Actually I mention Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, which is the book that got me started into Speculative Realism, in a couple of footnotes in *Immersion Into Noise*.

TR: *I think we touched on Speculative Realism before, but I want to jump back to that a little bit. It seems there is, with this movement, a reintroduction of metaphysics into a climate that's been hostile toward it for some time now...Metaphysics is now okay again.*

JN: Yes. I think that's the key thing. It's a hodge-podge. And in fact, Ray Brassier, who is the translator of the Quentin Meillassoux says that it's not a real movement, and that you can't lump these philosophers together. I've read Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, a book on new nihilism, and his piece on noise music called *Genre Is Obsolete* and I think he is right. With Speculative Realism you have speculative materialism, object oriented ontology, transcendental nihilism, neo-vitalism, transcendental materialism, and you have an interest in music, art and science fiction – which I think is just grand. But depending on how rigid you are as a philosopher, people could be put off by that. I was prepared for this by Deleuze, because for him philosophy is the creation of new concepts.

TR: *I recently read Bruno Latour's We Have Never Been Modern, and I was struck by what seems to be a movement toward becoming a little bit more friendly toward the object world – the non-human realm. It's not entirely off limits to us anymore, in other words – with our subjectivity "over here," and it "over there." That this dualism was just another fiction generated in the name of that "project of purity" we touched on earlier....*

JN: Yes, that is central to the Speculative Realists. Their whole jumping off point is refuting Kant. Correlationism is the big thing they're trying to escape – where we can only understand the world through our human spectrum of perception, and so that's Being. And they say no to that. That being is post-human – it's much bigger than us. Again, that brings us back to the sublime and transcendental metaphysics and all that. So, in a nutshell, they basically say: We have to explore being – ontology – outside of the Kantian strictures.

TR: *And that we can do that; it's not beyond our capacities.*

JN: Perhaps. And science fiction and speculation and art are all part of that. It's highly inspirational to an artist like myself and to some scientists because we are all into linked systems like the body, the environment, a-life, the cosmos. That's why I named my show *nOise anusmOs*, as in it anus and cosmos are linked to other systems.

TR: *I see so many parallels between what you're talking about and your working process. Here's my understanding of the process, and correct me if I'm wrong: You and your programmer, Stéphane Sikora, author a piece of viral code, which is then inserted into a selected image from your database of previous works. As the viral code transforms the image by altering its colors and configurations, you select captured stills from the process and play with them to make final compositions from which paintings are made. During the painting process, your hand does not touch the canvas; rather, the application is made by a robotic device acting on commands issued by the computer. The whole thing strikes me as a sort of wonderful dance – a dialectic, perhaps – between human agency and non-human processes. You don't seem to privilege one over the other; it's just this back and forth.*



autOmata retinal 66x44" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas 2011

JN: I would not ever say a dialectic, because I don't believe in dialectics. Deleuze does away with dialectics. It's too limiting. Because you have all the little differences in between the polarities – all those micro-areas that are far more rich and interesting and complex. So I would say: dialogue, but not a dialectic. A conversation or dance.

TR: *When you're selecting your host images for a viral attack, is it significant that they're always your own images, your own prior works?*

JN: Yes. The only other example I used in an attack was two of Andy Warhol's money paintings, which I just did for a short YouTube animation, because that was a specific thing for the Occupy Wall Street blog that I was happy to participate in. Otherwise, no. It's got to be within the family. It's not applicable for all things, in my mind. Or it would lose its meaning, it would dilute its usefulness.

TR: *You mean if you took an image from...well, from anywhere out there in the culture. You could conceivably do this to any image, right? And interesting things would happen.*

JN: Absolutely. It could be any image. And then the question is why. That's why when I talk about losing focus and the impact getting lost, that's exactly what I'm talking about. If it's any image, then why **anyone** image? So I'm trying to maintain its function as art. I think I talked about that in the introduction of the book that it's important to maintain this – even if artificially constructed – definition of art as something *other*. As a form of ideology. And that's what I'm trying to maintain with the use of my custom viral software that Stéphane Sikora and I developed.



TR: *The idea of disembodiment, as it is linked with the ecstatic and liberated, seems integral to what you've described as immersive noise consciousness. How do you see that playing out in the future? What do you think of the idea of "radical disembodiment," of our eventual liberation from nature, from the flesh? I'm thinking of figures like Ray Kurzweil, Hans Moravec. That's their stated goal.*

JN: No, we're not going to be able to upload our psyche into digital eternity. And worse than that, Kurzweil says that artists will become obsolete, because there will be software that will produce art all by itself while our music will be produced by algorithms. Doesn't that sound fantastic? And it might be possible. But it will SUCK!

TR: *So the body is important to you.*

JN: Obviously. I'm a sensualist! A bon vivant!

TR: *Absolutely.*

JN: I don't see why you should decide between one and the other. That's my objective, to avoid these kinds of cleavages and these decisions. Like mental/conceptual/digital or intuitive/physical/analog. No, these things must be in dialogue with each other.

TR: *Right. But it's just shocking, almost, the degree to which that's such a thoroughly ingrained conceptual habit – this constant dichotomizing.*

JN: Yes. Habits of thought. Mental clichés. Because we're lazy as thinkers. And we take things for granted. We don't challenge these given concepts. That's why there are artists. That's what artists are supposed to do: challenge ways of thinking.

TR: *That certainly comes across in your work.*

JN: You know; I was talking to a student yesterday. He's **brainier** and conceptual, and we get along very well. And he said: "I have a roommate who just says 'No, you're just supposed to do it! Don't think; just do it!'" And I said, "Well, you know what that means? It means you're doing what somebody else has already done, because you're not thinking about it because it came to you through osmosis or through exposure, so you're non-reflectively repeating what someone else has done." How is that superior to thinking about what you're going to do and trying to do something new and knowing what you're NOT going to do because it's already been done before?

TR: *I love David Bohm on this – his idea that the word "thought" is past tense for a reason. What we should really be having are "thinks." If you're having "thoughts," they're all from the past, they're inherited. Similarly, we should try to have "feelings" rather than "felts."*

JN: Yep. Fascinating. Good example.

TR: *So thinking about thinking is really important.*

JN: I think so. That's why I try not to make too much of a division between my philosophizing and my artistic creation. I mean, I'm not a philosopher, hard-core. But even Nietzsche himself said that the ideal philosopher would be an artist. And I'm trying to live that out on a mini-scale by keeping it moving back and forth between categories. Again, not looking for mush, not looking for homogenization, but looking for those differences which make for creation, that suggest new avenues of creation. Difference is novelty. I believe that art should try to be something novel, and I believe in innovation and invention. And I don't fall prey to these postmodernist myths of stasis and decay and repetition and simulation. That's a trap you can fall in if you want to, but I don't want to go there.

TR: *I was fascinated by the part in your book about Renaissance perspectivalism and the value system implicit in it.*

JN: Trompe l'oeil, three-point perspective and all that?

TR: Yes. The Renaissance "picture-as-window" approach to images that's become the conceptual or optical habit of our culture. And you suggest it's perpetuated by...

JN: The camera. Capture technology perpetuates it. And it makes it seem natural.

TR: Your pointing this out underscores the fact that every approach to art, every imaging system comes with an implicit worldview, which comes with a distinct system of values.

JN: And for me it's even more complicated. Because I have kind of an Oedipal complex about it, my father being a photographer. And I was taking a lot of pictures when I was very little. I've always been taking photographs. But I had a kind of Oedipal complex about it. I think it helped me as an artist, actually, because I wanted to resist representation as given in a photographic means. You know, it's a father-son thing.

TR: "Capture technology" is an interesting term. It sounds aggressive, like something you impose on some "other," on something that's definitely not you. The very opposite of immersion/participation. I guess it would be too simplistic to say that that capturing has been the only approach in art for the past five-hundred years – this detached spectator gazing out at the world rather than participating in it...Because there have been moments when it's been emphatically different.

JN: Yeah, but they're usually the exception, not the rule. And what locked in the rule is television, which gave us this little shiny box to look at.

TR: You clearly traveled a lot while doing research for *Immersion Into Noise*. Travel is incredibly immersive.

JN: Yes, it's inherently immersive. Couple that with reading about what you're doing, the history of where you've been. I think that's true knowledge. And then having physical experiences in space, and the cultural things – the wine and art – is key for me. Looking at this painting here [points to painting in studio], it's easy for me to wrap it around my head.





anus cOSmOs 44x66" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas 2011

It's very easy. It's like this rectangle becomes a bubble that goes behind my eyes. And that's what I'm hoping that people can project when they look at the work – is to get *into it*.

TR: *That's the thing. It doesn't have to be an installation environment for you to experience immersion.*

JN: Right. I don't feel it has to be. It can be, and that's obviously the most literal. But the literal way isn't always the only or the best way. For me, I tend to use all-over compositions – not always, but often. That suggests that it could go on forever. I think in the chapter on Pollock I tried to make that clear with the two museums that were proposed for his work. One by architect Peter Blake and one by Tony Smith, a hero of mine. They took seriously that idea – the derogatory comment that Aldous Huxley made about Pollock's work at the Museum of Modern Art, saying "Oh, but it's quite a bit like wallpaper. It could go on forever!" You know, disdainfully.

TR: *Aldous Huxley said that? Wow.*

JN: Unfortunately, yes. And actually that's the power of the work. That's what Allen Kaprow saw in Pollock's show at Betty Parsons' gallery, where he said: "Okay, I understand. It goes around the whole room, meaning it's all the world, meaning it's the street, meaning it's a happening." That's where he got his idea to create the happening, it was from seeing this exhibition of Pollock's. So this idea of expansion, of distribution, of availability all around us is really a suggestion that has many applications.

TR: *So these new paintings, these are still part of the Computer Virus Project.*

JN: Yes. Almost everything is now to some extent. Everything has something to do with the technique. It's my vocabulary. I don't necessarily forefront that aspect of it all the time, but it's impossible to leave it out. Because I just find the artificial-life viral techniques very valuable for creating unexpected results.

TR: *To what extent is it important that people know how the paintings are made – your process, your involvement with artificial intelligence, etc.?*

JN: Very important, and then I hope they'll forget it. Because I want them to go to their own place with them. I don't want to over-determine the interpretation of the work. At the same time, I don't want to deny where it came from or how it's done – the virtual materiality it's embedded in. But I don't want to be self-limiting, and I don't want to limit the viewer.

TR: *Speaking of titles and press releases and so forth....*

JN: Yeah. My titles. They're crazy.

TR: *I was just going to point out that holes figure prominently in your work. I'm thinking of your images of the human anus, the retina. But then there are these ubiquitous graphical holes – the gaping graphical holes – in your titles.*

JN: I decided that each O would be capitalized, and nothing else would be capitalized. It became a kind of symbol of opening, expansion, opportunity, ecstasy – all that. And it just became a habit, a trope – a stylized thing. Maybe it's pretentious, maybe it's not. I don't know. But I like it, and I'm stuck with it. But I work a lot on my titles. I think that it's important to be creative in titling just as much as in imaging, just as much as in technique and how it's done. It's all one and the same. It's my statement. And I come more or less out of Conceptualism – vis some vis the body and sensualism and all that as we discussed. But I usually have an idea first, before I start on a body of work – a theme. And so I've kind of been in that tradition of Conceptualism up to a point. "Conceptualism Plus." Language is important to me, the theory of what I do, why I do it, its historical ties. The ancestors that I honor. You know I love Dadaism and the Dadaists particularly, and that tradition of the avant-garde particularly as it came through New York, and Duchamp and Cage and Fluxus. That's what I love! Those are my ancestors that I want to honor. And the whole beginning of art and technology coming from that, coming from EAT and from Rauschenberg's involvement with art and technology – the



Cagean/Cunningham/Rauschenberg/Post-Duchampian aesthetic. Its Conceptualism materialized, actualized, viractualized.

TR: *Is that what you mean when you say "Post-Conceptual"?*

JN: Yes, it is. But I think that's an inadequate term. I haven't found a better one yet, however. It's like when you're talking about Post-Minimalism as a coming after Minimalism. It's not an adequate term. It defines what you're not, not what you are. But I still haven't found the right way to say how I see myself. And maybe it's not that important for me to define myself. It's how other people see the work – that's more important. But I don't shy away from speaking out as an artist. I really did get that from Conceptualism. Joseph Kosuth said the artist's role is to define – and actually, before him. Ad Reinhardt, who of course Kosuth got a lot of inspiration from, said that the artist should be saying what he or she is doing, that we're not dumb animals to be herded and exploited and sold like cattle, that we have a voice as cultural producers. And that's politics, of course. It's our obligation to use our voice. That's why I write sometimes – when I can. I don't shy away from that opportunity. But I'm not a prodigious writer.

TR: *I see such a consistency across all your various media. Your prose style in *Immersion Into Noise*, for example, is characteristically syncretistic, non-linear, "all-over" – in other words, it's noisy.*

JN: I thought it would have been silly to do a strictly academic style, when you're exploring something like cultural noise.

TR: *It's not like its stream-of-consciousness, with no punctuation...There's certainly a structure there, but the voice is ecstatic, personal, mercurial, even. And the text moves in unexpected directions.*

JN: Nervous in the way it moves. I agree with you. But you're right. I think it's my allover approach to life that provides that mercurial aspect.

TR: *Speaking of your "all-over approach," you've also been involved with music...*

JN: I'm very excited about the re-mastering of my *viral symphOny* into 5.1 surround-sound. Because I think when we're talking about immersion, and we actually physically re-master something into an immersive environment, we're getting closer to the themes of the book. Again, form and content are coming closer together. I realized some of the ideals sketched out in the book through this re-mastering of the *viral symphOny*.

TR: *And we will hear that soon?*

JN: We will hear *viral symphOny* in concert the night of the opening on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April at Harvestworks.

TR: *You make it explicit that your subject matter is ideology.*

JN: That started back with the early drawings. And that's why I started to draw these cliché images. When you look carefully at most of those early drawings, they're pile-ups of biblical imagery and Playboy imagery and military or "macho man" cowboys and lots more. This was the same period that Richard Prince was shooting the Marlboro Man, and it had something to do with "Morning in America" and looking at the imagery that was used to manipulate the populace. Which ties in closely with the history of fascist art – let's not mince words. I would go through tons of magazines and cut out the stupidest, most cliché imagery, like the blond bimbo, the macho man, all the most cliché stuff I could find, and that became the source material of those drawings. Because I was trying to work on cultural ideology and the visual language in which it's spoken.

TR: *It's such a tricky word, ideology.*

JN: It is. But it forms the underpinnings of our ideas.

TR: It's tricky "out there" in the broader culture. But also for artists. A lot of artists don't even want to touch it. I know a lot of artists who wouldn't want to admit that their work carries with it an ideology.

JN: Why is that? Is it painful? Is it dangerous?

TR: I think it's more dangerous. Scary. Talking about values is scary. But there's also this fear of making grand statements. I mean, we've seen where that got us with the utopian dreams of modernism.

JN: Right. Because I think we're talking about our own upbringing, our childhood, our relationship to our parents. Our relationship to our church, or synagogue, or whatever. Whoever – our boy scout master. Baseball coach – what else is there? All the adults that teach us how to live. Which is not a bad thing, obviously, but it's something to be scrutinized, particularly when you reach maturity. That's just the power of scrutiny, of self-reflectivity. That's how you can start reprogramming yourself. First you have to get to what you don't want to do, and stop doing that.

TR: Yes, you've really got to take a look inside.

JN: Yes, because if you don't take a look you're going to keep going like you've been going.

TR: Speaking of tricky words. Do you shy away from "the spiritual"?

JN: I shy away from the "the," not "spiritual." I think it's the "the" that mystifies me. It's too singular. For me, spiritual is **multivariate** and extremely immanent – it's embedded in everything and all reality. And so to put the singular on it makes it too much like a transcendental godhead thing for me. And I much prefer an embedded immanence approach.

TR: Yes, "the spiritual" is fraught with problems, I agree. One has to use it with caution. But you do use the term "the sacred" in your book. How is that different?

JN: I think when I speak of the sacred, I usually speak about it historically – in terms of sites and locations. It's more like a historical reference, embedded in architecture and in the grotto, the nymphaeum, and of course in the caves.

TR: Ecstatic – now here's a word you certainly don't shy away from. It's in the same family as those other words, but it's much more interesting, more open.

JN: It's a little bit more abstract, so people can fill in how it feels to them. It doesn't seem like anything can be imposed. It can be an emergent property that one feels and experiences for a moment. But I'm quite certain the capacity is in every human being to experience it. One needs the right conditions. I think art is one of the proper vehicles for allowing the possibility of that experience. I deeply believe in that.

TR: So that's what self-transcendence means to you: moving beyond the conventional notions of the self, the conventional ways of thinking, our utilitarian consciousness...

JN: Yes. And a kind of connection to the immanence of nature and materiality, the full vibratory spectrum. Early on, as I said, I wanted to express this with the early white paintings with stones. I was reading Werner Heisenberg on quantum physics at the same time and trying to understand the deep structure of the material, which is uncertain vibrations. But how to bring that into the art was not too easy. Although symbolism did give me a possible tool. But it's not too easy to go there. But it is almost impossible to visualize this stuff. And then, that's where it gets back to Speculative Realism, to understanding the limits of our perceptual spectrum and at the same time acknowledging that reality and being are beyond us – and us!

TR: That seems crucial.



JN: Yes. I think that's an important understanding, particularly in urban life, for people to reflect on. I hope that's what they'll get from the *nOise anusmOs* show. That's what my intention is – that urbanites, sophisticated art viewers, will feel and think about the grander beyond and have appreciation of it inside them. The great outdoors, indoors, inside them. Yeah, connecting the anus to the cosmos is for that purpose. To place an extremely personal, sensitive, human aspect, in a poetic marriage to that divine humongous "beyond us." You can call it spiritual, or godhead, or void, or nothingness. We don't know what to call it. It's beyond our full comprehension - thus ripe for artistic expression.

TR: *So certainty doesn't have to be the goal.*

JN: Even if it is, it's impossible.

TR: *My sense is that a lot of people find that repulsive – the idea that we can't know.*

JN: They're arrogant. They think, "Well, I'm so smart, I should know." Well, you know what you know, but there's so much more we don't know. Just look into black holes and black matter. Amazing stuff.

TR: *So if the goal of science and technology isn't to know the universe, what is it?*

JN: I think that is the goal; it's just impossible to achieve. But goals by definition should not be achieved. They're directions for the search. Yeah, I think enlightenment and knowledge is still absolutely the goal. It's not like we're going to tumble back into some dark age, some primitive non-knowing. I think I said that about noise, even – that that's not really the point. It's the function as Thermidor, which takes you to the point and then turns you back. I think that's the key contribution noise can make to culture. Not pushing you over the edge, but taking you to the brink, seeing it, and then knowing where you are in relationship to it. That's what the Thermidor does.

TR: *Huston Smith comes to mind: "The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder." Always expanding, but with full knowledge that there's always that "magnificent more," as you say.*

JN: I see it in other young artists. I've seen a few examples of artists who are really trying to work with getting back to respecting the enormity of nature, and trying to bring that into their work. And of course it has everything to do with a kind of dialogue with cyber culture -- the insufficiency of cyber-interactivity and networking and all that. No one ever said that would be the be all and end all.